

Illinois Correctional Industries (ICI) has partnered with the Illinois State Fair to help create a comprehensive recycling program for the 2013 State Fair.

ICI is the division of the Illinois Department of Corrections, which provides inmates with skills and training necessary to be successful upon release from prison. ICI currently has programs at 18 facilities, producing products and providing services. Revenue generated by ICI from the sale of its products fully funds its entire operation.

Jen Aholt, CEO of Illinois Correctional Industries, stated, "ICI is, first and foremost, a reentry program for the inmates and this partnership with the Illinois State Fair utilizes skills they have learned. I believe that whenever you can implement a recycling program that reduces the amount of waste introduced to landfill, thus minimizing landfill dumping fees, and provide inmates with prison jobs, you create a winning trifecta of sound public policy."

Correctional Industries to take over recycling at state fair

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By Doug Finke

From plastic bottles to aluminum beer cans to cardboard and even all of that oil used to fry everyone's favorite fair foods, the Illinois State Fair produces a prodigious amount of garbage.

It's got to go somewhere, and beginning this year, that somewhere is Illinois Correctional Industries.

ICI is taking over recycling efforts at the fair, and in the process hopes to make some money for the program and hopefully teach inmates some work skills they can use after they are released.

"It (ICI) is first and foremost an re-entry program for the inmates," said Jen Aholt, CEO of Correctional Industries. "Since a green collar economy is where the greatest growth is, this is a perfect industry for them to be part of."

"Recycling is a growth program," added Bill Gross, who is in charge of ICI's recycling program at the DuQuoin State Fair. "We've got people on the outside who are looking for workers that can run the forklifts and who know how to sort and how to bale. There are job openings for this type of work."

ICI, which has been running a recycling program at DuQuoin for the past eight years, is bringing the same program to the 10-day Illinois State Fair that begins Aug. 9.

It's going to start with 110 new trash-recycling containers that were made by inmates out of 55-gallon plastic drums. They'll be stationed around the fairgrounds, as will five semi-trailers.

Recyclable materials will be loaded into the trailers, and once they are full, they'll be taken to the Logan Correctional Center where the material will be sorted and baled. The baled material will be sold.

Recyclable material includes most of the things homeowners already recycle, including plastic containers, aluminum cans and cardboard.

"Basically all the food is boxed," Gross said. "Instead of just putting the cardboard in a trash dumpster, we put it in a trailer."

In addition to the usual stuff, the vegetable oil that's used to fry all of that state fair food is on the recycling list.

"We use to pay someone to haul it away," said state fair manager Amy Bliefnick. "We had a meeting with Correctional Industries and we find out they not only recycle it, but they take it and they use it for biofuel. There's tons of cooking oil throughout the fair."

It will all get recycled, but Gross said he already gets enough oil from DuQuoin to produce the biodiesel he uses in ICI's equipment at the Menard Correctional Center. The excess from DuQuoin is sold to rendering plants that process it for use in soap, he said, and that is probably where oil from the fair in Springfield will end up.

Most of the money made from selling the recycled material will go back to ICI, which is a self-sustaining enterprise within the Department of Corrections.

"What we have is what we make," Aholt said.

The exception in Springfield will be money made from the sale of aluminum cans. That will go to the Combined Veterans Organization.

Aholt said ICI is still developing an estimate of how much money is expected from recyclables at the Illinois State Fair.

ICI also plans to take some of the manure from the state fair and distribute it to prisons that have gardens. However, Aholt said the fair produces far more manure than can be used by the prison system.